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UNH Dining Serves Up Science - As Squash

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DURHAM, N.H. - The butternut squash being served in the University of New Hampshire's dining halls this month shows that you can do your science - and eat it, too. Long before it hit the steam table, the orange fall favorite helped a UNH researcher develop a better strain of squash for regional farmers.

"We're trying to produce better vegetables for all of the Northeast," says UNH professor of plant biology J. Brent Loy, whose world-renown research focuses on the breeding and genetics of cucurbits, vine crops that include squash, pumpkins, gourds and melons. "When I have experimental hybrids that are good, the excess can be used by the dining halls."

With the help of UNH farm manager John McLean and in consultation with UNH Dining, Loy planted a large plot of butternut squash on UNH's Kingman Farm this summer. At harvest earlier this month, blue plastic flags dotted the field, marking the squash Loy had hand-pollinated. Much of the space was set aside for evaluation of experimental hybrids of butternut being developed in UNH's breeding program.

Such large-yield trials produce excess squash for UNH Dining while keeping Loy's work true to UNH's academic mission as a land-grant university. McLean estimates that two to three tons of Loy's butternuts will go to UNH's three dining halls, which can dish up a few hundred pounds of squash at a meal.

The squash also serves UNH Dining's mission to increase the amount of local food it serves as part of its Local Harvest Initiative. "We'll buy as much as we can," says Rick MacDonald, assistant director of University Hospitality Services, noting that the squash is labeled in the serving area so diners can learn about its local pedigree and scientific service.

After several years of pursuing locally grown produce, UNH Dining has ironed out field-to-fork logistics. UNH sells the squash to Boston-based distributor Costa, which peels, chops and processes them into an easily-used format then sells then back to UNH Dining to steam, mash and serve the creamy butternut to its diners. The squash may go to other Costa customers if quantity allows; last year, Loy's kabocha squash was on the menu at Harvard as well as UNH.

Loy bred this butternut squash with an eye toward high eating quality, specifically high solids and sugar content. He also breeds for ease of peeling and processing and resistance to powdery mildew, a common scourge on New England vine plants. Loy incorporates sustainable practices into his breeding, aiming for hardy vegetables that require minimal pesticide application.ï¿½ "Brent has saved the earth a lot of insult from spraying," says McLean.

While this year's butternut squash represents the largest influx of university-produced food into the dining halls, MacDonald says diners are growing familiar with on-campus sources of

extremely local food. MacDonald regularly seeks out apples from the university's Woodman research farm and vegetables from the student-run Organic Garden Club. MacDonald sees the partnership with university researchers as fruitful. "The hope is that we'll grow this program," he says, "no pun intended."

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Photographs available to download:

http://www.unh.edu/news/cj_nr/2008/oct/squashinfield.JPG
Caption: After it helps UNH researchers develop a better strain of squash, this butternut will be served to students in the university's three dining halls.
Credit: Beth Potier, UNH Media Relations

http://www.unh.edu/news/cj_nr/2008/oct/loytest.JPG
Caption: Brent Loy, UNH professor of plant biology, conducts a field-based taste-test on a strain of butternut squash he's developing.
Credit: Beth Potier, UNH Media Relations